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PHILADELPHIA

SOCIAL SCIENCE ASSOCIATION.

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# The Pending School Problems.

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*Read at a Meeting of the Association,*

APRIL 5TH, 1883,

—BY—

PROF. M. B. SNYDER.

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## THE PENDING SCHOOL PROBLEMS.

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The tendencies of each era, as well as the given conditions of society determine, not only the problems of adult social life, but those of school life as well. As little would we now wage relentless war against the exclusively classic bias of the schools of the last century, as against the slavery in question twenty-five years ago. The battle has, in each field been, to all intents, fought and won. But in each case, do we still face problems of progress. The social problems concerning adult life, however, habitually receive thoughtful consideration with a view to actual solution, while those pertinent to life at the school period, are too frequently the subject of fruitless declamation.

We perhaps forget that there is a sense in which there may be progress even in School Problems. It is true, that time out of mind, they have been, and indeed, for all time to come may be put in the same form of language. Yet their solution is conditioned by the necessities and negligencies of the period and of the social condition. It therefore seemed to me, a creature of the existing *regime*, that a discussion of the Pending School Problems, and their probable solutions, might well engage as thoughtful a consideration and as hearty an interest on the part of this association and of the public, as that accorded to the other great Social Problems. With all the pathos of immature years, do your own children here plead for relief from the bondage of purely intellectual discipline, from the thraldom of neglect in vital matters, happening somewhere between the home and the school, and finally from the tyranny of an irresponsible School System.

Undoubtedly the School Problem first inviting a thorough consideration, is that of providing, in some efficient manner, for the physical welfare of the children. It might seem to those who look at school life from a convenient distance, that no grave fears need be entertained about the health of children, and that some very good people are, unnecessarily, disquieting themselves and others about this matter. We might be told that parents complain but little, although it must be admitted, they do at times a little complain when hopeless disease or premature death have put the child's case beyond all the human courts of complaint. The teachers themselves, says some one, who live and

breathe in the midst of the facts, seem not to know of this "great problem." It would in me seem unkind to admit, in them, the indifference of positive ignorance concerning this matter, and still more so, to agree that easy going motives may, in any manner be militating against the interests of the child. I ask you, therefore, not to regard as criminal, an indifference, which, although in full view of the violation of hygienic laws, results from the belief, the stolid belief, that under our present system of management, there can be no efficient method of securing health conditions. To those, however, who are conversant with the actual school and home life of children in large cities, and who, at the same time, borrow the eyes of the physiologist, this apathy, so general on the part of parents, directors, teachers, and the public must, to the last degree, seem grave.

Without stopping to point out how it comes about, that so little practical attention is given to a sound body as vital to the happiness of the child; without reciting the catalogue of delusive hopes cherished by parents, and the false, yet attractive, educational theories, all of which lie at the base of this apathy, let us more closely consider the facts.

To start with the coarser class, I might well pass the lack, in our school rooms, of proper heat, adequate ventilation, suitable light and general comforts, as having already been so earnestly portrayed, and the remedies in construction so definitely shown by Dr. Lincoln before this association. Yet I am quite willing to add, to what he has said on this point, the trifle of my own experience and observation. Granted that the improved school houses, suggested by Dr. Lincoln, were at hand, I much doubt whether a system that maintains ignorant, lazy, and occasionally, superannuated janitors, would not violate any plan aiming at pure air, good heat, cleanliness and comfort. How utterly invulnerable some of these janitors are to the plea of child and teacher, for plenty of heat and pure air must, I am sorry to say, be left to a vivid imagination. As incompetent and unwilling, I need not characterize all janitors, nor even janitors as a class, but I must call in question a system that allows any indifferent dolt thus to trifle with the health of your child and with my health and energies as a teacher. I charge, that frequently school-rooms are, after the days use, "dusted up," and then tightly closed, lest the foul organic effluvia should become oxidized, and the building rendered sweet. Take but three breaths of school-room air, some fair afternoon, and feel every sense recoil with a shudder of disgust. Then, with the impression still vivid, imagine that with this same noxious month-old atmosphere, a

darling young life, of keener sensibilities, is daily drugged. To complete the picture, you may add a refined teacher, who, to all seeming, is alive only to the necessity of urging and enforcing the memorized tasks required by the system, but at heart, sullenly grieves the wrongs of a system that scarcely allows, much less enforces, attention to proper health conditions. How many children have, by this ignorance and indifference of the system, been chilled and poisoned into development of disease is, on account of the slow and unequal pace of deterioration, known only to medical men and Providence.

Coming now to the finer point of the over-tasking of the nervous system, we have before us a large field for criticism. That there is such a thing as overcrowding the capacities of children, is a truth, not at all admitted to the rank of an axiom in our system. For, instead of endeavoring to avoid catastrophies so far reaching in misery to the future adult, the system is rather planned so as to incite the teacher to require, for the most part, memorized acquirement as the requisite to advancement. With eagerness, the teacher stimulates and the child memorizes, until just before or after some examination-day, the unfortunate child, mentally, or at least physically, breaks down. The case may attract public notice, and thus in the newspapers, finally be set down to the criminal demands of the teacher. But the injustice thus done the latter, passes without comment. Ignorant of practical physiology and hygiene, the average teacher undoubtedly is; but what shall we say of the system that allows the exercise of such unrestrained ignorance? More than this. How shall we characterize a system that, by ranking the teacher according to her success in this memory-cramming process puts the stamp of virtue on overtasking. When even the teacher is driven to tears of distress by the demands of examination, in what condition of mind can you expect the sensitive child to be? In addition to pointing a physiological moral, I might have emphasized the false principles of living inculcated by these methods, but that would have been foreign to my present purpose.

In connection with the matter of over-stimulus, Kintergarten and primary schools, require special attention. Through the benevolent interest of some enlightened ladies of this city, the Kintergarten are upon us. And as at so tender an age our children are to fall into the hands of the teacher, we ought particularly to run out the danger signal. No one, indeed, who has thoughtfully looked into the Kintergarten system, can deny, that it may do important service in those unoccupied years of the child's life. Yet I have the soundest reasons for cautioning the patrons of this enterprise, to beware of overstims-

ulating precocious intelligence. Without taking any special pains to collect information on this point, I have, within a few weeks, learned of three grave cases of physical trouble attributed to the influence of so-called Kintergarten. In two of the cases, the special trouble developed, was St. Vitus dance, and in the third, the child who had been kept perforating its cards by the hour, was actually driven to the insanity of "perforating" its mate's eye out. It would then seem, that premature development of disease, is an acquisition perhaps not more precious than free unfettered growth, with the happiness of health and of natural ignorance.

It is not, however, necessary to put the ban upon this great enterprise, if it will start and grow from a sound hygienic basis. And lest I might appear to the ladies interested in this matter, too severe and too definite, I may be allowed to quote a few sentences from an English lady, Miss Emily Shirreff, who is at once a keenly intuitive writer, and one of the cleverest of advocates for Kintergarten. In arguing for the use of the female intellect, as a force in our education, she says: "Thence it is evident, that when women are appealed to as the natural educators, it is implied that they will make education their study, and acquire the knowledge requisite for assisting the mental and physical development of their children during those years which prepare the course of all future years. There is no need that they should have made a deep study of either physiology or mental philosophy, but unless they clearly realize, that mental and bodily health depend upon conditions which can be learnt only through some elementary knowledge of these two sciences, how can they ensure those conditions for their children, or how judge if they are or are not observed in the educational institutions, Kintergarten, or schools in which their children are to be placed." I would point to this significant advice as particularly worthy the attention of the ladies struggling for the higher education, as pronouncing with emphasis alike, the necessity for a physiological basis for education, and the demand for woman genuinely informed in such trifles as physiology and hygiene. And if such knowledge must be deemed important to the women who would pretend to any sort of proper control over the education of their own children, how much more definitely and decidedly should systems of training and superintendence of such systems be founded on more than a superficial knowledge of physiology and mental philosophy. Of Primary Schools, we must remark, that the long hours of confinement, cramping little muscles into one attitude, and holding little brains to uniformity of task, need serious attention. If little children

must, to the gratification of parents, be kept away from home so many hours, shall we not adopt the trust, and at once introduce play, gymnastics and some species of manual training?

From long confinement to books, girls, as being of a more sensitive nature, suffer, perhaps, the more. Their case, indeed, deserves special attention. Romp and play is, if ever indulged in by girls of cities, never allowed to go through their growing "teens." This absence of play, when joined with burdensome school tasks, is fatal to health. Our procrustean system is here lacking in the spirit of true motherhood and fatherhood. Girlhood, with its issue into healthy, and consequently happy womanhood, is violated, not only by the ordinary course of school life, but, moreover, by the false public sentiment which demands for the girl a completion of her education and accomplishments, at a period when growth and the determination of physiological functions bid us wait for the years that are now dawdled away in both physical and mental inactivity.

To emphasize the fact, that girlhood, at the school period, needs particular attention, I might quote warnings from all the well-informed in the entire medical fraternity, but shall limit myself to a few sentences from two eminent Gynecologists of this city, and who represent in turn, the two schools that unfortunately divide our medical house. In a lecture on "Nerve-tire," and The Ills of Womanhood, Dr. William Goodell\* says: "Now, in these days of mental overstrain, nerve-tire, or neurasthenia, as it is technically called, is so common a disorder in our over-taught, over-sensitive, and over-sedentary women, that in its successful treatment, every physician has an abiding interest." And further on in the same lecture, he says: "Take, for instance, this too common picture from life: 'A girl' in the bloom of youth and health, 'and without an ache, is over-tasked and over-taxed at school, and her health begins to fail.' She goes through all the usual nomenclature of symptoms, which you can readily pardon me for not quoting; from suffering she lapses into exhaustion, and, to use the Doctor's own words, "unimproved, she drags herself from one consulting room to another, until finally, in despair, she settles down to a sofa in a darkened room and lapses into hopeless invalidism." "Now, what is the interpretation of this train of symptoms? What mean all these aches and sufferings? I can not pretend to give," says the Doctor, "the precise pathology, but I take it to be something like this: The yet developing nerve centres of this brain-crammed girl

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\*"Lessons in Gynecology," p. 333.

were unable to cope with the strain thrown on them, and they broke down. But jaded nerves make poor blood and faulty circulation." From these come cerebral and spinal irritation, together with all those previously indicated ills which, physiologically succeeding each other, gradually convert the once happy girl into the hopeless woman.

Dr. J. Nicholas Mitchell, of the homeopathic side, in a recent letter, thus plainly puts the matter :

"In answer to your question regarding the effect of too close study and application on the part of young girls who have come under my observation, I wish to say :

"That on many occasions I have been struck with the evident harm that has arisen to girls, with blooming health in their childhood—with every promise of future usefulness and health—through a too great desire on the part of their parents and teachers, to push on the bright intellect they may display, by inuring them to hard study and close application. Such girls I have seen, after they have finished their studies, after they have, perhaps, graduated from their schools with the highest honors they could get, but with their womanhood apparently destroyed, their health shattered, their nerves in such constant tension, that they were unable to look forward to anything but long drawn out existence of suffering. The pushing on of their brains at a time when their entire system was but just developing, when their womanhood was but budding, has sacrificed their womanhood to their brains.

When I see a woman of clear complexion, of good form, and with every appearance of health in her young womanhood, one of those women who are the charms of social life, and who are able to fulfill their functions as mothers and wives, I am accustomed, on inquiry, to find that they graduated low in their class ; that they were the dispair of their teachers and the madcaps of the school."

It would tire you to state every phase of this matter, but I assure you, much yet remains to be said. The sum of it all is, that between the long school hours, with additional tasks to be done outside of school, and the lack of attention to physical exercise, both at school and at home, the child sedulously and sedatively studies, and so grows muscularly flabby, intellectually drivelling, and emotionally hypersensitive. It seldom, unless by accident, learns the true happiness of muscular activity.

As in our cities at present neither school nor home allows suitable exercise, either school hours must for this purpose be shortened, or, better still, the proper physical exercise be given at school in gymnas-

tics and old-fashioned play; or, best of all, by these combined with some useful muscular work. If the community set about the matter in the right spirit, it would not be so difficult to provide playshops and workshops hard by each school-house, that would become the delight of the child. While I would never allow any system, by long hours, to crowd out the spontaneity of growth and play, it seems to me that we might conserve and utilize the forces now checked and wasted. Much of the school material and apparatus needed in the illustration of the sciences, arts and industries, could, in a suitable construction-shop, be manufactured by the boys and girls themselves. We would thus secure not only relaxation from books, but also employment and training for the hands. Moreover we would habituate children to varied activities, and thus inculcate the true philosophy of healthful mental and physical life.

In concluding the discussion of this physiological problem, I cannot but refer briefly to other grave questions, which the teacher must at times either settle or completely ignore.

Children in ill health are kept at school. No suitable laws or rules on this subject being in force, the teacher is made the unwilling instrument in aggravating disease. Born, for example, with defective eyesight, many a child, owing to the severe strain put upon the unwilling organ, develops either a listless dullness, or a more unwelcome mental irritability. We have in our schoolrooms the writhings of the epileptic without compensating mental advantage to him, and with perhaps positive injury to others. The chronically sickly and idiotic may need an education, but the crowded rooms of our Public Schools should first be reserved for the healthy and sane.

Matters like these are not mythical, but come under the notice of the teacher daily.

It appears, then, that the demand for authoritative physiological supervision of our schools in large cities is made quite evident by the facts, and needs no further argument. Medical Supervision is indeed not a novelty. Already the progressive educators of Europe are agitating to effective issue, the supervision of the health conditions of their schools; and American thought is already awakening to the importance of this matter. The method of introducing such supervision is, moreover, vital to the best results. If we consign this supervision to Boards of Health, we cut into two a problem that requires unity of solution. We cannot separate the consideration of the amount of time and attention that can be given either to play, gymnastics, or work, from the general problem of the conduct of schools. So with

the entire list of physiological questions. To one and the same direction, then, must be consigned the problem in its entirety. If Philadelphia ever rises to the height of this problem, it will assign this supervision to a professional teacher, or body of teachers, of a liberal type of culture, and through him or them devise ways and means for securing and preserving health in childhood; for bringing the Medical Profession into closer relation with the schools, and all, in harmony with the common necessities of school routine.

Next to the problem of health conditions comes that of the course of instruction and training. What to teach and how, form one and the same oft-mooted problem. From lack of space, my only purpose here can be to point to a better method of solution than now obtains, through the action of our received school system. Practically the solution is now got by the odd combination of three factors, viz.: the course of study, the books, and the teacher. Of sound, round about sense, but a modicum is allowed to appear in the process of solution, and whatever comes to light in the result is for the most part a gratuity on the part of the teacher.

One should think that the problem would be considered broadly; first from the standpoint of the child's faculties and capacities—that memory and the faculty of comparison and judgment would both receive suitable exercise, but that the æsthetic and emotional side, as being particularly active in the child, would also receive due attention. That, secondly, the child's relation to the work-a-day world would by no means be left out of account, but that always its faculties would be exercised on useful materials. And again that, as power and aptitude in the use of the mental faculties are to be preferred to mere acquisition, we would rather exercise all the faculties on one kind of knowledge, than the one faculty of memory on many kinds. In short it would seem that there ought to be a Science of Teaching—a science comprising both a theory and applications, the former based on a sound Mental Philosophy, and the latter on a knowledge of methods and appliances. Allow me to hint that there is such a science as Pedagogics, and that if our system is ever to be the best possible, it must be based on this science.

On every hand we are met by educational hobbies. Our school-rooms are made ghastly to the child, by the skeletons of method without the flesh and blood of real instruction, or the spirit of a genial culture. How shall we here secure the good and avoid the bad? What test apply? Certainly the study given by the ages to Mental Science should be our great laboratory for testing these educational matters.

Mental Philosophy does not always mean the harmonious, incessant struggle upward, like a Wagner in his cadences, to the ever unattainable. There are also acknowledged facts and principles tending to application, and this application can nowhere be made to more advantage than in the school-room. If the old line of philosophers, from Aristotle to Kant and Hamilton, do not seem to serve us, we may perhaps gain something in the way of suggestion from the Modern Physiological School, as already so ably founded by Carpenter, Ferrier, Luys, Bastian, and the host of alienists. But if all these seem inadequate or too remote, we have still to interrogate the long line of Philosophical Teachers from Socrates to Pestalozzi—from Comenius to Fröbel.

Not to grow too theoretical, allow me to illustrate the necessity for genuine theory and investigation, by reference to a few practical questions. In the first place one might suppose that “object lessons” were always what the advocates for them would have us believe: lessons got from objects, chiefly by the use of the senses, and therefore a culture of the senses. Whereas, for the most part, they are and must be an exercise in “words.” Though professedly intended to make pupils see so much, they are not unfrequently dull exercises in disjointed ideas about uninteresting objects. But we need to pause here, and get our philosophy of the relation between seeing and thinking, in order to clear up the subject. To this end we quote from the late Professor W. K. Clifford,\* who thus plainly puts a truth some new-fangled discoverers in Education seem to forget: “Now the wonderful thing to remember here, is, that the world in which we all of us live is not made up of the individual sensations of objects for the most part, but it is made up out of the general conceptions. If you try to think of what has passed through your mind during any day, you will find that a very small part of it is made up of those special sensations of sight and sound which you get from things, but that it is made up of the suggestions and thoughts which arise out of them, and which were carried on by means of language; which were carried on therefore by the help of the particular perceptions of individuals included under them. *The world in which we live is a world of thought—and not of sensation.*” We see, then, that simple perception of the senses, however important, does not lead us far on our way. The world too in which we live is not only a world of thought, but even the world which we see is for the most part what we think it.

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\* “*Seeing and Thinking*,” by W. K. Clifford, F.R.S., page 107.

How widely different is the observation of most familiar objects ! Take an upward look at the heavens :—As a poet, Shakespeare views them thus imaginatively :

“ Look how the floor of Heaven  
Is thick inlaid with patines of bright gold.  
There’s not the smallest orb which thou beholdest,  
But in his motion like an angel sings,  
Still quiring to the young-eyed Cherubim.”

As an astronomer, our lamented Watson bade us look through his “optic glass,” and his mystic equations, and thus behold “the wonderful mechanism of the Heavens, the contemplation of which must ever impress upon the mind the *reality* of the perfection of the Omnipotent, the Living God.” From either of these I would not too suddenly descend to the ordinary vacant gaze at the Heavens, and call this “observation.” So the world is something as we see it, and much as we think it ; and our seeing, something depends upon our senses and sensibilities, but more upon the eyes of the Past. And so “object lessons” may in practice lead into the unknown world of words, and “reading lessons” may bring us back into the actual world of objects.

Again, to show the need for careful investigation, allow me to refer to the discussion concerning Industrial Education. The widespread interest in the subject is attested by the special course of lectures now being given by prominent manufacturers of this city. The time and manner of introducing the much needed instruction, are still matters of discussion.

I was, therefore, particularly impressed by Professor Norman Lockyer’s recent able argument, for a more complete general education as a basis for industrial life, and just as much puzzled by a quotation made from Dr. Siemens, in support of this position. Dr. Siemens substantially asserts that in Germany, of recent years, the pure technical schools have been receding, and that the *Gewerbe* or Industrial Schools have been approximating their curriculum to that of the Gymnasia or Grammar Schools. The statement may undoubtedly be taken for fact, but the inference that natural causes have here altogether produced this result, or that Germany’s experience is here particularly significant, is not at all so clear. We must not ignore the dominant military system, which by its laws determines with irresistible influence the success of one sort of schools and the unpopularity of the other. The fact is that Germany’s military *regime* exempts students of the Gymnasia from two years of the dreaded and detested military life,

while it does not accord this privilege to the other class of schools. Under these unnatural conditions it is evident which one of the two classes the aspiring youth would choose. Particularly during the last decade and a half, should we expect the one class to prosper and the other to retrograde.

While then in hearty sympathy with Mr. Lockyer's plea for a more extended general education as the true basis of industrial progress, we also believe that it does not require the rather uncertain support of the educational schemes of Germany. Indeed, we find that if we wish to be thoroughly grounded in any point in this great discussion concerning Industrial Education, we must give exceeding attention to the premises of our argument. This attention to the collection of facts of experience, this investigation of the necessities of the time, it is evident, can not be safely expected from those who are not professionals in this class of work.

Whether then the problem of what to teach, involve Mental Science on the one hand or a careful investigation of tendencies and demands of actual life on the other, we are driven to the conclusion that the only solution worthy implicit confidence is that arrived at by the educator who makes the study of such matters a profession.

From all the foregoing it may plainly be inferred that the greatest and most pressing problem yet remains to be stated. It is that of the efficient management of the schools by the community. Orators and essayists do not find it so difficult to suggest an improved character of school—better health conditions, more useful curricula, superior methods of instruction, but all these excellent suggestions are for the most part futile in issue. They may stimulate the imaginations of a few hearers ; in actual improvement little is accomplished.

A superficial glance at the system of management encouraged by the public, discloses the blockade to progress. Instead of a simple professional direction, we labor under a management, in the extreme, cumbrous and indefinite. It comprises local school boards, a central board of education, teachers and occasional philanthropic quidnuncs. Supposing, now, a clearly important school reform necessary, how shall we effectively address the task ? Educational declaimers periodically assure us that it is the parents themselves who must take a greater interest in the schools, and there the buncombe ends. Not altogether to dispute their point, pray what class of interested parents shall carry forward our reform? Perhaps those who are phlegmatically indifferent even to the animal existence of their phlegmatic children, or it may be those of the exquisitely nervous type, who are in such a chronic hyperaesthesia

about the mental education of their nervous offspring? Perchance it is the parents, in high rank and low, who live lives of idleness and ask the schools to train their children to industry and moral purpose, or those even who toil unceasingly in order that their children may be trained to school habits, that too frequently result in genteel idleness.

Can it be those who are so highly religious that, upon the modern inquisitorial rack of newspaper defamation, they willingly break any teacher that *unguardedly* speaks of morals, or shall it be the irreligious and irreverent class, who while they are satisfied to allow the moral side of childhood to remain uncultivated, demand that the schools shall furnish their children a character?

While we allow all these classes to dispute whether our school should not be something like a nursery or a reformatory, we may take counsel of that great middle class, who at once with decided emphasis assert that we have directors and teachers to look after our schools. Clearly we gain nothing by declaiming about parental interest. The community of parents has by its every action and inaction, placed the problems of school progress out of hand. It has consigned them to directors, controllers and teachers. But the community does not so plainly seem to know that the management is still very disadvantageously distributed. Directors and controllers, though usually non-professional, yet determine the school system in character and course; and this at the odd intervals they may snatch from their ordinary business cares, and without being able to give that comprehensive study which these educational matters demand. So, happy go lucky, a system comes to be adopted, and to this system the teacher becomes a helpless slave. Higher than its inherent height the teacher can not, dare not rise. No wonder then, should we see stamped upon the works and ways of school life the principle of easy going—of *laissez faire*.

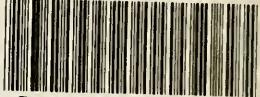
However, much we may respect the duties and privileges of directors and controllers, it should but rarely belong to them to develop either a philosophy or a practice in education. Through oversight or neglect the community has too much ignored this important point. It expects of directors and controllers what from the time given, and opportunities of observation had, they are not competent to perform. And it places too slight an emphasis on the professional direction of our schools. It is the professional teacher that early learns the systems, deficiencies and impractical tendencies, and to him alone should be given the opportunity to correct the defects.

Allow me then in conclusion to say, that if the community seeks the key to further progress in our schools it will find it, in endowing the

teacher with opportunity for the study of the manifold bearings of his task, with power to determine his own system, with practical motives to high effort, and in short, in endowing the teacher with that dignity which belongs to a responsible, trusted, professional life. Whether the question be one of health, or of studies, or of general management, we have learned that the problem must be solved, if solved effectually, by professional experience and investigation. It becomes, therefore, the first duty of the community to hand the school problems over to those who by profession, are not only most vitally interested, but thoroughly capable in their solution. By establishing a general superintendency of schools, our Board of Education has already taken one step in the proper direction. And we hope, too, that we may regard this as but a harbinger of the introduction of a system of superintendence that will give to every professional force at work, in the widespread school districts of this city, scope, recognition and efficacy. The community has discharged but half its duty by the establishment of a supervision that allows some possibility of progress. It must, through its school controllers and directors, cherish the highest professional attainment. Realizing, too, the tremendous interests of future manhood and womanhood involved, it must, in these matters, place professional experience and attainment in undoubted authority. Only, thus, will it encourage the introduction of improvements in our school management worthy of the profoundest mental and physiological science.



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